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COLLEGE PLANNING

Middle School Goes Out of Fashion

Amid Evidence Kids Struggle With Move to Junior High, Districts Shift to K-8 Model

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One of the longstanding rites of passage in American childhood is on the wane: middle school. That traditional precursor to high school that usually encompasses grades six through eight can be an exciting and challenging transition for preteen kids. But as every parent knows, it also can be fraught with anxiety over the tougher academics and more-sophisticated social scene.

Now, a growing body of evidence is showing that preteen students do better when they can remain in their familiar elementary schools for longer -- with better grades and fewer disciplinary problems than their middle-school peers. As a result, many school systems are starting to do away with middle schools and are increasing the number of elementary schools that continue through the eighth grade.

The number of public K-8 schools still is relatively small -- around 5,000, according to the U.S. Department of Education. But that number represents a 17% increase since 1993-94. That compares with a 9% increase in the total number of public elementary schools, which now number about 65,000, most of which go up to grades five or six.

These so-called elemiddle schools took root in the late 1990s with a few large, urban districts such as Cincinnati, but the movement has been spreading. In affluent Orange County, Calif., officials with the Capistrano Unified School District are planning to convert as many as eight of their 36 elementary schools to K-8 schools. School officials in Bristol, Conn., last month visited Brookline, Mass., an entirely K-8 school district, to observe a K-8 school in action. School-board officials plan on proposing the idea of building two K-8 schools to the full board of education in the coming months. The Boston suburb of Everett, Mass., converted its junior high and elementary schools to pre-K through 8 schools and built three new pre-K to 8 schools from 1999 to 2003.

While the change began with a need to replace 100-year-old school buildings, Everett Superintendent Frederick Foresteire says he also was dissatisfied with the discipline problems and poor standardized test scores at his junior high school, which comprised seventh and eighth grades.

"At that age, they don't know whether they're babies or adults," Mr. Foresteire says. "Our whole theory was let's keep these kids babies as long as we can."

The shift has its critics, some of whom think adolescents don't belong in the same school with tiny grade-schoolers whom they could easily bully. Many districts seek to address this by creating separate entrances for younger and older children.

Another criticism: Some parents have expressed concern that K-8 schools may not adequately prepare kids for high school. Because they often are newer and smaller than traditional middle schools, elemiddle programs can't always offer as broad a range of class subjects and extracurricular activities.

In Baltimore, which has created 30 new K-8 schools, a report showed that in K-8 settings, "students...had less opportunity to take Algebra 1 and a foreign language," which it says are "gatekeeper" courses, or courses that increase the likelihood that a student will attend college. Bonnie Copeland, the district's chief executive, says she is working to make those courses more available as the schools become more established.

It is a reversal of a model that has been a hallmark of public education in the U.S. for generations. The idea of a separate school for young adolescents began around a century ago, as educators and college administrators seemed to favor the idea of starting secondary education earlier. By the 1980s, educators were beginning to recognize that while an intermediate school offered certain advantages, it also created pressures on young adolescents.

Negative Attitudes

An early study tracked hundreds of middle-school-age students in Milwaukee public schools, comparing those who switched to a new school in grade seven with their counterparts in a K-8 school who didn't have to make any switch. The research found that those who switched had more negative attitudes toward school and lower grades. Girls in particular didn't recover in middle adolescence (grades nine and 10) when it came to self-esteem and participation in extracurricular activities.

In a new review of 20 years of research on middle schools, Rand Corp., a nonprofit organizations in Santa Monica, Calif., concludes that states and school districts should "consider alternative structures that allow them to reduce multiple transitions across grades K-12" in order to capitalize on "continuity of schooling and introducing changes gradually."

A number of districts that have recently begun converting to K-8 configurations say they have already noticed fewer disciplinary problems among students, as well as an increase in test scores.

Test Scores

The School District of Philadelphia is in the midst of a five-year plan to do away with many of its middle schools -- reducing the number to 21 from 36 by 2008 -- and increase the number of K-8s to 137 from the current 61. The district's chief executive, Paul Vallas, says the district was emboldened by research and anecdotes from other school districts that pointed to the benefits of K-8 grade configurations. Particularly troublesome in Philadelphia was the noticeable decline in test scores after students graduated from elementary schools, which mostly went through the fifth grade. "Sixth-grade test scores were always our lowest," Mr. Vallas says.

Now, an analysis of standardized test scores from 2000 to 2003 shows that reading and math scores are consistently higher for eighth-grade students enrolled in some of Philadelphia's new K-8 schools compared with those in traditional middle schools. The average reading score for K-8 students was 1218 in 2003 compared with 1146 for students in middle school. Also, Mr. Vallas says, K-8 schools have higher attendance rates and fewer incidents of student discipline than do their middle-school counterparts.

Districts that embrace the concept are faced with a mess of planning issues, such as building science laboratories and additional libraries to make room for middle schoolers in an existing elementary

school. In Everett, Mass., building three new schools and adding everything from new classrooms to new computers to its existing elementary school and junior high schools cost \$55 million, funded primarily by state and local tax increases.

Not all districts making the transition do away with middle schools entirely. The Capistrano school district in California is offering their new K-8 schools simply as an option for parents, some of whom still favor middle schools.

'Ready for a Change'

District resident Vernie Jones says she decided to send her twin sixth-grade daughters to middle school this year instead of keeping them in their elementary school, which is adding middle grades and will morph entirely into a K-8 school during the next couple of years.

"It was time to move on and they were ready for a change," says Ms. Jones.

Brenda Mierczynski, on the other hand, considers a new K-8 school a dream. Having her three kids all in one school at the same time is advantageous because when the youngest starts kindergarten, "her big brothers will be at the same school," she says. "I feel like our kids today are forced to grow up so fast," she says. "This gives us the ability to slow things down a little bit for them."